

Elise Blumann: Music in motion

Artwork Labels

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Wall Text:

Elise Blumann: Music in motion

Elise Blumann was a significant painter in the history of Western Australian Modernism. When Blumann arrived from Europe as a German émigré to Perth in 1938, she brought her experience amongst the European avant-garde to a conservative art scene in Perth that had been dominated by more traditional painters such as George Pitt Morison and James W R Linton.

Music in motion explores the inspiration Blumann took from the human figure over her career, as she sought to capture the energy of movement in her paintings. The exhibition traces the development of her stylistic approach, from early works upon arrival in Australia to later works as an established painter during the 1970s.

Recurring motifs for Blumann include the figure of a surfer and of a conductor. In both these 'series' Blumann sought to convey a poetry of motion: her interest was in the energy and aesthetic forms created by these central subjects. Over time Blumann's style changed from a keen observation of anatomical structure, contained within her highly gestural paintings of surfers, to the more geometric, almost 'colour field' approach in her depictions of the conductor. This stylistic change was accompanied by a change in medium as Blumann shifted from working with oil on board to watercolour, pastel or gouache on rice paper.

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Much of the focus on Elise Blumann has centred on her work from the 1930s and 1940s, exploring her influence as a European on Modernism in Western Australia. In displaying such later works as the 'conductor' series, this exhibition explores the evolution of Blumann's practice, in both style and material. The show highlights the significance of a central figure in Blumann's paintings, and the creation of dynamism in her work, depicting the inherent energy in keenly human activities, displaying music in motion.

Hal Missingham

born 1906 Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

died 1994 Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

Elise Blumann

1978

silver gelatin print on paper

Gift of Hal Missingham, 1981

1981/00J5.32

Elise Blumann

born 1897 Parchim, Germany

arrived Australia 1938

worked Germany, The Netherlands, England and Boorloo
/ Perth, Western Australia

died 1990 Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

Untitled [Study for nude with birds]

not dated

pencil on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E012

Spring in Life

1943 {some repainting 1940's & 1972}

oil on masonite

Purchased 1985

1985/00P1

Elise Blumann

On the Swan, Crawley

1938

oil on cardboard

Purchased 1976

1976/00P6

This work was painted soon after Blumann arrived in Perth, demonstrating her skill as an artist at this stage of her career. In 1938, the bars of colour characteristic in much of Blumann's work began to appear. This device was also found in the work of several German Expressionist artists such as Kirchner, Pechstein and Mueller. In Blumann's case these bars became part of the decorative composition, conveying the artist's response to the universal energy of nature.

Elise Blumann

Gooseberry Hill

1948

oil on hardboard

Janet Holmes à Court Collection

2025/E006

In 1945 the family purchased a vacation home in Gooseberry Hill where a small shack was built to serve as Blumann's studio. Here the artist discovered the vegetation of the Australian bush, and grass trees and banksias became recurring motifs in her work. Her paintings depict the plants in the undergrowth from a low perspective and often from close range, eschewing details. The vegetation assumes abstract shapes, and the position of a central subject akin to a human figure. While increasingly abstract, this work demonstrates Blumann's place in a long tradition of European representation of the Australian landscape.

Banksia Flowers

1946

oil on card

The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art

2025/E007

Elise Blumann

Storm on the Swan

1946

oil on paper on composition board

Gift of Mrs Elizabeth Lefroy, 1984

1984/OP11

While landscapes had previously served as backgrounds, during the 1940s Blumann developed this genre into independent subjects. A recurring motif was the Melaleuca, an Australian species of tea tree that characterizes the area around the Swan River. These river views of the late 1930s and early 1940s demonstrate Blumann achieving an independence and originality in her art, melding her influences with the inspiration she found in the Western Australian landscape. Blumann brought to a colonial society a European habit of living within nature rather than in opposition to it.

Rottnest lighthouse and salt lake

1947

oil on board

The University of Western Australia Art Collection,
Gift of Dr and Mrs R K Constable, 1985

2025/E008

Left to right, top to bottom

Elise Blumann

Study for Surfer

1942

gouache on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E029

Surfer

1979

watercolour and chalk on paper

On loan from the State Library of Western Australia

2025/E005

Surf

1939–1946

oil and gouache on masonite

Purchased 1985

1985/00P2

In *The Surfer* series, Blumann takes a common theme of Australian iconography: the surfing subject and the near nude human body on Western Australian beaches that was new to her as a recent German immigrant. In these works, the use of striped patterning becomes a dominant

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artistic device. Highly stylised loops construct the waves, combined with careful anatomical study, to depict the power and energy of both the surfer and the ocean environment. Blumann combines a formal language of European Modernism with the vivid and dynamic nature of the Australian coast, emphasising the feeling of having arrived in a new environment.

Elise Blumann

Surfer

c1940

oil on canvas

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E011

Elise Blumann

Surfer

1980

watercolour and pastel on rice paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E013

Right to left

Elise Blumann

Pat

1945

oil on paper on board

Gift of Sue and Ian Bernadt, 1992

1992/0198

Blumann's portraiture sought to sum up an individual's character using a structure of broad handling of paint, balanced against careful drawing. In her portraits of friends, as well as commissions, Blumann relied on clear drawing and bold areas of colour. Her compositions were based on a detailed linear structure, built up from brushed in lines that form part of the finished work. While marking her as an unusual Modernist painter, this technique for portraiture was one used by Cézanne, a key influence for Blumann in her portrait making.

Young girl

1970

pastel and gouache on paper

Curtin University Art Collection. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers, 2003

2025/E002

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Portrait study

1942

gouache on wallpaper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E028

Wall Text:

“The painter feels, experiences and imagines in (or by means of) line, and form and colour. Only if these elements are fused to a new unity a work of art is created.”

ELISE BLUMANN

Elise Blumann

Dream

1970

watercolour and ink on handmade paper

Purchased 1990

1990/0032

Dreaming nude

1970

watercolour and ink on handmade paper

Gift of Dr Rose E Toussaint, 1993

1993/0253

Käthe Kollwitz

born 1867 Königsberg, Germany (Kaliningrad, Russia)

worked Munich, Berlin, Germany

died 1945 Moritzburg, Germany

Helft Russland [Help Russia]

1921

lithograph on paper

Purchased 1970

1970/0Q31

Elise Blumann regularly attended left wing political gatherings in Berlin, such as those held by the group Die Aktion and Der Sturm, along with other avant-garde artists such as Käthe Kollwitz. In Perth, artists who challenged the Establishment of the art scene were spurred by the reaction against Fascism. Modern Art became associated with increased politicisation and with social radicalism. Social and cultural spaces in the previously conservative and sedate society of Perth and Fremantle became increasingly politicised following such global events as The Great Depression, The Spanish Civil War and Britain's entry into WWII. Left wing arts organisations came under Federal and State scrutiny, with their houses and organisations regularly ransacked and telephones tapped, and their names besmirched as radical. Even establishment galleries came under the pressure of conservative political forces in the 1930s. Blumann herself was a naturally conservative and individual artist, despite working in forms associated with social radicalism in Perth.

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Anatomical sketches]

c1918

ink on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E016, 2025/E017, 2025/E018

These archival studies demonstrate Blumann's proficiency in technical drawing and anatomical composition from her training in Hamburg and Berlin, where she earned a diploma as a drawing teacher.

Elise Blumann

**Untitled [Sketch of train station in Eutin
30 Dec 1918]**

1918

pencil on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E019

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Study for Conductor]

c1970

pencil on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E020

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Study for Conductor]

c1970

charcoal on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E021

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Study for Conductor]

c1970

charcoal on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E022

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Study for Conductor]

c1970

ink on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E023

Elise Blumann

Elise Blumann's Colour Diary

not dated

ink and pencil on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E025

Elise Blumann

**Untitled [Miller Gallery exhibition
catalogue with reviews]**

1979

printed ink on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E027

Elise Blumann

Untitled [Man and woman]

1982

gouache, conte and watercolour on paper

Curtin University Art Collection. Donated through
the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by
Helen and Ben Korman, 2007

2025/E003

Elise Blumann

Discussion on a rooftop

1943

oil on board

Cruthers Collection of Women's Art,
The University of Western Australia

2025/E009

Figure study

1976

pastel, conte and watercolour on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E030

Once established with a studio in Hackett Drive, Crawley, Blumann began working from models, creating a series of emblematic female nude studies that became paintings. In these works, Blumann was informed by the expressive dance she had seen in Germany in the 1920s. In Perth, models were difficult to come by for nude paintings, and so friends often modelled for Blumann. In her nudes, Blumann was inspired by such artists as Auguste Rodin, studying extended and highly dynamic poses. She balanced this dynamism with the more decorative nude works of the Jugendstil movement, the Viennese form of Art Nouveau, which was another key influence.

Elise Blumann

Study for Surfer

1942

conte, charcoal and gouache on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E031

Elise Blumann

**Untitled [Notes on art and fashion
sketch]**

not dated

ink on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E033

Elise Blumann

**Untitled [Notes on the heirarchy of
artistic genres]**

not dated

ink on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E034

Elise Blumann

Artist materials

box of powdered paints, pastels, charcoal and rice paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E036.1-3

After travels to Malaysia in 1968, and Cambodia and Japan in 1969, Blumann brought home with her a roll of rice paper and began working with gouache, watercolour and pastels on this medium. These materials allowed for a looser, washed, application of colour, compared to the thick painterly strokes of Blumann's early work. Her new choice of medium was also accompanied by the increasingly abstract and geometric use of form.

Elise Blumann

The Conductor

1970

gouache and watercolour on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E032

The energy Blumann saw in surfers was also reflected in the subtler, yet no less dramatic, power of motion that she saw in the conductors at the Western Australian Symphony Orchestra that inform her *Conductor* series. Blumann regularly attended rehearsals, encouraged by her neighbour and friend Marshall Sumner, the noted pianist. Her *Conductor* images sought to express the dynamic forces of people and their movements. In these later works, Blumann's forms became more angular and tense, with greater simplification and stylisation. Here the use of line, pattern and colour blocking are more dominant than in her earlier gestural, expressionistic work.

The Conductor

1971

watercolour on rice paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E010

Left to right, top to bottom

Elise Blumann

Conductor

1972

pastel and gouache on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E015

Conductor

1980

watercolour on paper

On loan from the State Library of Western Australia

2025/E004

Conductor

1974

pastel and gouache on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E014

Conductor

1977

gouache on paper

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E024

David Gregson

born 1934 Western Australia

worked Paris, France, Boorloo / Perth, Western Australia

died 2002 Western Australia

Portrait of Elise Blumann

1982

oil on canvas

Collection of the Blumann Family

2025/E035